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in Ireland

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Migrant Women and Homelessness: Key Findings from a Biographical Study of Homeless Women in Ireland

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Migrant Women and Homelessness: Key Findings from a Biographical Study of Homeless Women in Ireland

This Research Paper presents *selected findings* from a primarily qualitative study of homeless women in Ireland. The study set out to conduct an in-depth examination of the lives and experiences of homeless women with specific attention to their homeless 'pathways', that is, their entry routes to homelessness, the homeless experience itself and, possibly, their exit routes from homelessness. Sixty women, seventeen of them migrant women, were interviewed in depth for the purpose of the study. **This paper focuses specifically on selected findings arising from the stories of the migrant homeless women.**

Key Points

- **Marginality** within contexts of economic adversity was at the core of migrant women's accounts of becoming homeless.
- A large number of the women reported **intimate partner violence** and many attributed their homelessness either directly or in part to intimate partner abuse. However, other factors played a role and these particularly came to the fore in women's accounts of the **process of leaving abusive relationships**.
- Permeating the accounts of women who had experienced intimate partner violence – as well as others who did not report domestic abuse – were experiences and challenges related to their **economic and social marginalisation**.
- The economic difficulties encountered by migrant women were related to a range of experiences including **unemployment or job loss**, their **economic dependence on their partners**, their **immigration status**, and their **restricted access to welfare payments and affordable housing**.
- The experiences of women in domestic violence situations were exacerbated by their **specific position as migrants**, including their lack of English language proficiency, lack of access to the labour market, their uncertain legal statuses, and lack of knowledge about available services and supports.
- **Migrant women were not well informed** about homeless or domestic violence services and uncertain about the impact of their status as migrants on their eligibility for these supports.
- Those women – eleven in total – who had **dependent children** struggled to provide them with basic needs, including food, clothing, books, toys, and social outings.
- Migrant women with histories of intimate partner violence faced **economic and housing difficulties** once they entered the hostel or refuge system which, in addition to the effects of intimate partner violence, presented strong obstacles to their exiting homelessness.
- Migrant women with **no immigration status** were particularly vulnerable and confronted very significant barriers to exiting homelessness.

Introduction

Since the late 1990s there is emerging consensus that homelessness is a significant issue for migrant populations throughout the European Union.^{1,2} The same trend has been noted in the Irish context, where there is general recognition that many more migrants are accessing homeless services than previously.^{3,4} Yet, there is a relative dearth of knowledge and understanding of the experiences of migrants who become homeless, the circumstances that push them out of home, or their interactions with services.⁵ This is certainly the case for migrant women, a group who remain largely hidden within dominant discourse on homelessness in Ireland. This paper documents key findings on migrant women's experiences of homelessness in Ireland. It particularly focuses on their economic and social marginalisation, the vulnerabilities of those living in situations of domestic violence, and women's lack of information about available services and supports.

The Study

Sixty women, aged between 18 and 62 years, participated in the research. The study was primarily qualitative and incorporated a number of data collection techniques, including: (1) the conduct of a detailed **life history interview** with all participating women; (2) the administration of a **questionnaire** which aimed to collect data on women's housing and homeless histories, education, families and children, histories of violence or victimisation, criminal histories, and physical and mental health; (3) the conduct of **ethnographic observation** at four homeless service settings in Dublin city; (4) the involvement of a small number of the women in a **photography project**; and (5) the conduct of **focus group with professionals** involved directly in the provision of services to homeless women.

The women were selected for participation through contact with numerous homeless or domestic violence services in Dublin, Cork and Galway. In order to participate, women had to be currently homeless or to have experienced homelessness during the six months prior to interview. **Sixty women** participated in the study, seventeen of whom were migrants.

The findings documented in this paper draw on data from the interviews with **seventeen migrant women**. Thirteen of these women were interviewed in the Dublin metropolitan district and four in provincial cities. Pseudonyms are used throughout this document to protect the anonymity of the women. All identifiers (names of family members, friends etc.) have been removed as a further measure to preserve the women's anonymity.

The Women in the Study (N = 60)

Age

The average age of the 60 women interviewed was 34.8 years. All were over the age of 18 years. Twenty (one third) were aged 18-29 years, 26 were between 30 and 39 years, 6 were aged 40 to 49 years, and the remaining 8 women were over the age of 50 years.

Countries of Origin

Thirty-eight of the women were Irish born, six of whom were Irish travellers. A further five women were born in the UK (three of whom had one or both parents of Irish nationality and had moved to Ireland during their teenage years). Thus, a total of 43 of the 60 women interviewed were of Irish or UK origin. The remaining 17 women were born outside Ireland or the UK and migrated to Ireland in later life, typically between the ages of 20 and 30 years.

The Migrant Women in the Study ($n = 17$)

Age

The seventeen migrant women interviewed were aged between 25 and 52 years, with an average age of 32.5 years. Six women were aged 20 to 29 years and a further nine were aged 30 to 39 years. One woman was in her forties and another in her fifties.

Countries of Origin

Ten of the migrant women came from the Eastern European countries of Poland ($n = 4$), Latvia ($n = 2$), Slovakia ($n = 2$), Estonia ($n = 1$), and Romania ($n = 1$), and one woman was from Greece. The remaining six women were born outside the European Union in the countries of Bangladesh, The Philippines, India, Pakistan, South Africa, and Bolivia.

Length of Time in Ireland

Ten of the seventeen women had arrived in Ireland during the four years prior to interview and a further six had been living in Ireland for between four and seven years. The remaining participant had been in Ireland for just six weeks. For the most part, the migrant women had spent at least one year in stable housing, usually in the private rented housing market along with a partner, family member or friend(s), prior to becoming homeless. However, five had experienced far less stability of housing since their arrival in Ireland for reasons linked to intimate partner violence, their restricted access to housing and welfare benefits and, in three cases, because of drug- or alcohol-related problems.

Immigration Status and Residency Conditions

Of the six non-EU migrant women, four had no immigration status and therefore no right to work, study or access social welfare benefits. Two of these women had dependent spouse work permits at the time they arrived in Ireland but these became invalid upon leaving their relationships. Both of these women left their homes because of intimate partner violence.

Five of the women from European countries did not satisfy the Habitual Residence Condition (HRC). The HRC is a stipulation which requires social welfare applicants to demonstrate length and continuity of residence as well as a satisfactory history of employment in the Irish state. Women who did not satisfy the HRC had no entitlement to jobseeker's allowance, child benefit, or one-parent family payment, nor did they have access to social housing or rent allowance.

Living Situations at the Time of Interview

Eight of the women were residing in emergency accommodation at the time of interview. Of these, three lived in a domestic violence refuge, three in a homeless hostel which accommodated children, and two in a homeless hostel for single people. Three of the women were in transitional housing designated specifically for women who are affected by domestic violence. One woman was staying with friends and another was sleeping rough at the time of interview. The remaining four women had recently moved to private rented accommodation following a period of homelessness. Three of these women remained heavily dependent on the assistance of an aftercare or homeless support service.

Duration of Homelessness

The duration of homelessness experienced by the seventeen migrant women ranged from one week to three years. Three of the women had been homeless for less than six weeks and a further three for between six weeks and five months. Thus, six can be classified as 'newly homeless'. Nine women had been homeless for between six months and two years and the remaining two women had been homeless for between two and three years.

Education, Employment Status, and Sources of Income

The migrant women were relatively well educated, with 16 of the 17 interviewed having completed a Leaving Certificate equivalent educational level or higher. Only one of the migrant women currently had paid employment and this was a part-time cleaning job. However, eleven of the women reported strong employment histories in Ireland (for example, full-time work for the same employer for more than one year), albeit in low-paid jobs, such as in the hospitality or manufacturing sectors. Critically, four of the women were not eligible for welfare benefits for reasons related to their immigration status and a further five did not satisfy the Habitual Residence Condition (HRC) and were therefore not eligible for state support (see above for details on the women's immigration status). Depending on the decision of their Community Welfare Officer (more recently known as a Department of Social Protection Representative), some received 'emergency' payments of €100 per week. However, not all of the women were in receipt of this payment.

Relationship Status and Children

A majority of the women ($n = 14$) were not in a relationship at time of interview. Twelve were separated from their spouses, two of whom were legally divorced. Fifteen of the seventeen women had children. Most of their children were young, many under the age of 10 years, and several had children under the age of two. Two of the women were the mothers of adult children who resided in their countries of origin. A majority of the mothers had one or two children; one was a mother of eight. Eleven of the mothers of children under the age of 18 years were caring for their children full-time. One woman's child had been placed in foster care and the child of another woman resided with relatives in her country of origin. Both of these women reported a substance abuse problem.

Migrant Women's Journeys to Homelessness

The events and circumstances surrounding migrant women's first homeless experiences were multifaceted and complex. Nonetheless, a number of dominant themes or strands of experience did emerge strongly from the narrative data. These include the experience of intimate partner violence or abuse, the women's economic and social marginalisation, and the challenges they faced in accessing appropriate services and supports. Together, these experiences compromised migrant women's ability to secure and maintain housing and simultaneously created vulnerability to housing instability and subsequent homelessness. It is critically important to note that these precipitating experiences were not mutually exclusive but rather overlapping and recurring within migrant women's stories of becoming homeless.

Intimate Partner Violence or Abuse

Thirteen of the seventeen migrant women reported that they had experienced violence or abuse in the context of an intimate partner relationship. Both the nature and duration of abuse varied, although most of the women reported a combination of physical abuse (e.g. hitting, slapping, punching or choking), emotional/verbal abuse (e.g. intimidation, name calling, manipulation, threats of violence), sexual abuse (e.g. forced sexual intercourse, sexual assault, rape), and financial or economic abuse (e.g. controlling the household budget and financial transactions, confiscation of immigration documentation). All thirteen women experienced emotional abuse as well as at least one incident of physical abuse or violence, while six also reported sexual abuse or violence by an intimate partner. The women's narratives almost always referenced the negative and long-lasting impact of domestic abuse on their lives.

“ I was really weak, like powerless and without my will and anything ... So my whole life changed, all the ambitions which I used to have, the art you know, the music, everything, just he [husband] stepped on it ... At the moment I am not able to do anything what I want. I am not able to be fully free, you know ... I try to remember who I was before [domestic violence], you know, so I think that's good. This is like a new beginning for me ” (Tereska, age 25).

Ten of the thirteen women who had experienced intimate partner violence or abuse attributed their homelessness either directly or in large part to the experience of domestic abuse.

“ I mean the things that comes from your partner, the person that you love, the person that you share your life with and you find, out of the blue, after two years that this is not the person ... and I lost complete faith in myself. I said I have bad judgement, I start blaming myself. He turn everything against me and then I found myself, out of the blue, homeless, living under a stairway ” (Irena, age 55).

Many of the women's accounts suggest a clear link between the experience of domestic abuse and housing instability. However, other factors played a role and these particularly came to the fore in women's accounts of the process of leaving abusive relationships. Migrant women's narratives in fact draw attention to a host of economic, social, legal, and cultural factors that influenced their responses to intimate partner violence or abuse; these same factors affected their risk of homelessness after separating from their partners.

For example, Nala explained the process of leaving a rural location along with her daughter where she had lived with her husband. She was in the early months of pregnancy at the point of leaving.

“ And then, I thought, I took a decision [to leave], even I think first time in my life I took my own decision. Even in [country of origin] or here I never took my decision ... So I just take my bag which was very small bag and he [husband] took my mobile as well; I don't have that time mobile. Just took €250 pay and my daughter's passport and my handbag, that's all I have that time ... I don't know where I am going, my daughter was asking and I said, 'We are going in Dublin ... It was very small town [where she lived] and I ask somebody how I can go in Dublin ” (Nala, age 30).

Nala had received information on the refuge where she subsequently resided for a period from a stranger in the bus station after arriving in Dublin. Later in the interview she explained her current situation. Having lost her immigration status, she could not seek employment and her housing options were extremely limited.

“ For two years, I'm just wasting my time, I cannot go for work, I cannot do study, I cannot do FÁS courses and I feeling like I am just wasting my time ... and then with the children and feel sometimes lonely as well because of not any friends ... ” (Nala, age 30).

At the core of women's stories were accounts of economic and social marginalisation. The dynamics of these disadvantages, and their impact on their paths into and out of homelessness, are explored next.

Economic and Social Marginalisation

The migration process itself presented challenges for a majority of the women interviewed. Most, for example, did not have a full command of the English language, certainly at the time of their arrival in Ireland. A large number also talked about the sense of social isolation they experienced and most struggled, to some extent, with the absence of familiar people and connections, particularly during the period subsequent to their arrival in Ireland. A number, as noted previously, did not have immigration status and this seriously compromised their economic independence. All of these factors worked to create vulnerability to housing instability and homelessness.

For five of the women in the sample, financial strain arising from job loss and unemployment was a dominant reason for their homelessness. Cecylia had moved to Ireland five years earlier and had worked full-time until one year prior to her interview. She was made redundant quite unexpectedly, at which point her main income was job seeker's allowance. After a six-month period these payments ceased and she was forced to leave her private rented apartment. She lived with a relative for a period but this living situation proved unsustainable and, before long, she reluctantly presented herself to an emergency homeless hostel. She described the consequences of her sudden redundancy notice.

“ So, I was shocked, I lost my job. You know everything was okay and then they said people are just redundant, you know ... Yeah, it was a shock for me because then I checked my balance and I said, ‘Jesus Christ, I have no savings, nearly no savings’. Because if I knew the recession would come I would save, but I didn’t ... ” (Cecylia, age 27).

Katia, who was 25 at time of interview, similarly told how her financial and housing difficulties developed simultaneously, leading her into homelessness. She had worked in the retail industry for four years but a chronology of events impacted on her housing stability. One was the return of flatmates with whom she had shared private rented accommodation to their countries of origin, creating significant strain on her ability to sustain this rented accommodation. This event coincided with the birth of her first child. As a single parent with no social support network she found that she could not remain in full-time paid employment and simultaneously care for her child. She entered into family emergency hostel accommodation relatively quickly.

Job loss brought about many challenges and, in many cases, interacted with other circumstances to create vulnerability to homelessness. Reports of substance misuse were uncommon among the study’s migrant women but two did report problem drug use and a third, who was sleeping rough at the time of interview, reported heavy alcohol consumption. Agnessa had lived in Ireland for seven years and, during that time, her drug consumption levels had fluctuated to a considerable extent. She reported consecutive weeks or months of heavy drug use, amid periods of lower consumption, but had maintained employment for approximately six of the seven years. Her account describes a combination of issues – job loss, relationship difficulties, and drug use – in the circumstances leading to her homelessness. She had also experienced intimate partner abuse.

“ I started taking drugs again and then he [partner] used the excuse, you know, that I had to go out of the flat as well. So that’s how I became homeless you know, and it was especially after I lost my job that’s when the fights started because he said, ‘I’m not going to be with you when you are not working’, you know ” (Agnessa, age 32).

The economic downturn impacted on the women’s ability to maintain their housing situations and on all aspects of daily life. Vonda had also experienced job loss, having worked in a number of low-paid jobs since her arrival in Ireland two years previously. Within weeks she and her partner were issued with a notice of termination of tenancy: *“There was no money. We were in debt with the apartment so our landlady told us to move out. She gave us two weeks to move out”*. Vonda faced many barriers to securing employment and housing, including her limited command of the English language.

“ Now for two months we don’t have a place to live, we don’t have a home at all. Why? Because there is no job ... I am looking for a job but it is not possible to find it. I know the language poorly and that is where there are difficulties ” (Vonda, age 48).

Income poverty presented challenges for all of the migrant women and was particularly acute for those with no immigration status. For example, Delilah had been living in emergency hostel accommodation with her daughter for nineteen months at time of interview. She had experienced intimate partner abuse over a lengthy period, both prior and subsequent to her arrival in Ireland and, with no immigration status, was not eligible for welfare benefits or to participate in the labour market. She survived through charity donations and sporadic cash payments for cleaning the home of an acquaintance. Her perceptions of “existing”, and of feeling “invisible”, reveal the impact of her immigration status on her ability to secure income and housing.

“ I called [name of charity] sometimes, sometimes they come and sometimes they don’t, it just depends. I call them for food, I ask friends ... I feel like I have been abandoned now, you know, when you don’t have nothing and you keep calling friends and sometimes they visit or you want to visit them but you think maybe they think I want money. So I have been living basically like a beggar, not living, I call it existing in Ireland because I feel like I am invisible ” (Delilah, age 30).

Economic dependence on their partners acted as a major deterrent to women leaving violent or abusive relationships. Problems surrounding their immigration status in the event of leaving were highlighted as a barrier to exiting abusive home situations. A number of women felt “trapped” in abusive relationships while others had been forced to return to their partners following their initial attempts to flee because they had “nowhere to go”. Others feared the consequences of leaving an abusive partner.

“ I say, ‘I leave you’, he will kill me ... The police can only take you one night from the house. So I was scared, I turn and I go back to house ” (Immanuela, age 29).

Women’s reluctance to expose their stories of violence to ‘outsiders’, including family members, emerged strongly from their accounts and contributed to a perception of violence as something to be endured rather than escaped. A considerable number described a set of community or cultural values that acted as obstacles to seeking help. Negative repercussions in the event of family knowledge of their leaving an abusive relationship was a particular fear for some and a smaller number conveyed an expectation on the part of family members that they would remain in an abusive home situation.

“ They [my family] don’t want to listen to me that he was hitting me ... They said the wife must stay with the husband even if one time he hit you ... They say to me that I must pray, maybe he change ” (Immanuela, age 29).

When reflecting on her situation, one woman framed her current experiences using her country of origin as a key reference point. Her account reminds us that some migrant women arrive from countries where domestic violence may not be reported because of a lack of legal protection that prevents women from reporting violence.⁶

“ I would say the root of my problem is the patriarchal culture in [country of origin]; the lack of development there; women are victimised so much and we are made to believe that this is normal, that our husbands will always treat us badly and hit us and that we must endure this. This is what the problem is. If I could change the situation, I would try and solve the problem of poverty and violence, this is the root of all my problems and the reason for which I am here ... ” (Sofia, age 34).

Practically all of the women who fled situations of domestic violence reported difficulties in meeting their children’s needs. These women typically reported that they felt unable to adequately provide their children with basics including clothing, food, books, toys and social outings. Their child care responsibilities in turn compromised their ability to seek or maintain employment since labour market participation necessitated child care support. A number had been forced to quit their jobs due to the financial strain of maintaining employment without housing and childcare support.

“ How can I go [to work] without a house, without a babysitter or there wasn’t a crèche. So I went away from the job and stayed in [a homeless hostel] ‘till I find something else ” (Dominika, age 25).

“ I really want to go to work but my problem is how I am going to put the baby, you know at the moment, and I cannot manage to go, to put in the child care you know, that’s really my worry. I don’t know how I am going to manage my life ” (Maria, age 29).

A majority of the women interviewed lacked financial independence due in large part to their specific position as migrants. Their ability to respond to ‘crisis’ situations such as job loss or the consequences of fleeing abusive relationships was therefore limited. This served to exacerbate their already vulnerable positions and created a situation in which housing exclusion and homelessness were more likely.

Approaches and Barriers to Seeking Help

A majority of the study's migrant women were unaware of any support services that may have been available to them on becoming homeless in the Irish context. Women typically stated that they did not "know the system" or how to go about seeking help when they first experienced housing instability. This was particularly the case for women living in contexts of domestic violence who, for the most part, had no information on available options or about where to go for help, advice and support. This resulted, in many cases, in women remaining in abusive home situations for far longer than might otherwise have been the case.

"I had no idea a place like this [refuge] exist. I had no idea the guards would help you. I had no idea the school would understand, the GP would understand. I had no idea about anything. I felt alone and just because of that I didn't leave him [husband] earlier" (Alexandra, age 30).

Women most often relied on some form of 'supported escape' from abusive home situations but these sources of support were unpredictable and it took time to establish connections with people whom women felt they could approach for help. Those who encouraged and enabled the women to exit abusive situations over time included the Gardaí, parents or teachers at their children's schools, friends or neighbours, and social workers in fewer cases.

However, not all women could avail of either formal or informal support when leaving abusive home situations or seeking help in relation to their housing. A number had relied to a far greater extent on a chance encounter. Three women had approached a stranger whom they believed to be of the same ethnic origin to seek help in relation to their homelessness and/or domestic abuse. Sofia explained that she had walked the streets of Dublin's city centre "looking for people who looked like me" who might be able to provide her with temporary accommodation. When seeking help Maria had similarly approached a man on the street whom she believed to be of the same ethnic origin.

"I just found him [person who helped] on the street, you know, we are the same [ethnicity]. He knew I was really scared. I didn't know where to go, I didn't know the system in Ireland ... I was just living two days with [him], you know, because he just offered me. He gave me information about the [refuge] and that made me go to that emergency accommodation" (Maria, age 29).

Several of the women stated that they were "confused" about their residency rights and about the impact of their immigration status on their eligibility for support services. Others were misinformed or relied on partial or inaccurate information. Indeed, a significant perceived threat for many women was a fear of telling anyone, including medical professionals, who may have been able to intervene or offer advice.

"So it [intimate partner violence] started when I was six month pregnant and then was very, very often because he know that I don't tell anybody this, I was so scared of talking. I never go to doctor to show my bruises" (Immanuela, age 29).

A majority of migrant women were initially anxious about approaching homeless or domestic violence services for assistance. These feelings were strongly associated with the 'culture of shame' surrounding domestic abuse and marital breakdown. Women also worried about the perceived stigma of a homeless status and identity: "I don't like the word homeless ... it shows a picture of somebody sleeping in the streets and everything, not really nice picture" (Tereska, age 25). A number were reluctant to use homeless services due to their negative perceptions of homeless hostel accommodation. Others expressed safety concerns for themselves and their children in these contexts. For a majority there was a powerful stigma associated with being homeless and this impacted on women's willingness to access services.

Barriers to Exiting Homelessness

Women's lack of access to affordable housing and their income poverty combined to act as major barriers to their exiting homelessness. Those who were living in a homeless hostel or refuge and in receipt of welfare payments, particularly those with dependent children, struggled to save money for the payment of a deposit for private rented accommodation. Several others had applied for supported housing but this transition was reported to involve long waiting periods. Women who waited for move-on options invariably felt "stuck", "trapped", or "left behind" in emergency accommodation. Bina (age 32) had been living in a domestic violence refuge for over nine months and had observed many women enter the refuge and leave relatively quickly.

"The Irish women get the support from the Social and they look for the accommodation and they get the right rent allowance. So they just stay for a few weeks and they just move on with their life ... Lots of women came and move out and move on with their life. The only one who is left out is me" (Bina, age 32).

A majority of the migrant women depended on some form of state income support. However, four had no immigration status and, consequently, no welfare entitlements and an additional five did not meet the Habitual Residence Condition. All of these women struggled to make ends meet and depended primarily on emergency payments, donations from homeless charities, and casual low-paid work. A number worried that their emergency payments would cease, highlighting the impact of this persistent financial insecurity.

"So always you are terrified that Oh my God if the payments [emergency payments of €100 per week to support her and two children] stop, then what will happen because I am not allowed to work in this country as I have no status and I don't have any social welfare help. So I am always worried" (Bina, age 32).

A range of other factors affected the women's ability to find secure housing and to live independently. These included problems related to their physical and mental health. Almost all of the women reported feelings of depression and/or a deterioration in their physical health. These health problems had often resulted from poor eating habits, sleep deprivation, or high levels of anxiety and stress. Women also attributed their health difficulties to the trauma of intimate partner violence and to the experience of homelessness itself, which had resulted in inactivity, unemployment, lack of social interaction or support, insecure housing, and uncertainty about the future.

"I have too many problems, no school for kids, [services] have not help me nothing, you know? I'm very, very tired. I don't know, I'm not happy ... I have problem 'cause no house, no money, not have passport ..." (Monika, age 39).

"Last two months I am having kind of breathing problem. There is no asthma so maybe there is subconscious stress ... Maybe [it has gotten worse] because I become lonely again. I'm not lonely actually, but not doing anything [inactive]" (Aisha, age 31).

Many expressed concern about their children's well-being and about their ability to cope in school and other settings.

"And even she [daughter] can't forget ... The one thing is more hardest for me at the moment is coping with my daughter ... She is all the time worry about me. I tell her, 'No I don't have any worry, I am fine', but she can see my face and she is taking worries ... And specially when I came here, she was feeling nobody like her in the school, even it's happened because she is only Asian child, only Muslim child in the school and the behaviour was very, you know, they didn't behave nice with her" (Nala, age 30).

The stress experienced by many women affected their ability to enter the labour market, seek help and support, and function productively in everyday life. Additional barriers to housing stability were reported. These included abusive ex-partners who engaged in “stalking” behaviour, forcing them to move repeatedly in an effort to ensure their safety. Difficulties with past landlords who continued to pursue some women for money were also recounted. One woman told that her landlord had withheld her personal documents and possessions. Social isolation and the absence of family or friendship networks emerged as significant barriers to women’s ability to exit homelessness. Many did not have close family members living in Ireland and few could maintain regular contact with family members in their countries of origin. Those who did have contact with parents or siblings in their countries of origin had not informed them about the domestic violence or homelessness they were suffering because of stigma or feelings of shame; others did not want to burden their family members with knowledge of their situations.

“Seeking help in a refuge is like a stigma for our community and people are too ashamed to say these things ... Whenever they know about my situation, they just step back” (Bina, age 32).

“My family doesn’t know what is going on and I am living this life, do you know, of nothingness. I feel my pride is being crushed” (Delilah, age 30).

“No, I was not able to ring my family because I was really not sure what reaction because my mum is old now ... It needs time to settle my mind, you know, because I don’t want my mum just suddenly shocked you know” (Maria, age 29).

Those women, four in total, who had recently secured accommodation in the private rented sector following a period of homelessness, had relied on the advice and assistance of hostel and refuge staff, who explained their rights as well as the procedures and processes associated with accessing housing. At the time of interview, three women remained heavily dependent on the support of aftercare and other services. The stability of one of these women’s housing seemed particularly precarious. During a later interaction with her as part of the photography project she reported numerous financial and personal problems and expressed concern about her ability to maintain her current accommodation.

Despite the challenges they faced, migrant women did not see themselves as victims and, indeed, a majority expressed strong self-determination in relation to their situations, rejecting the ‘victim’ role as being an undesirable and inaccurate portrayal of their lives, situations and experiences.

“I don’t want to go and spread the word around that I was abused, I don’t want people to look at me and think, ‘Oh the poor thing, the victim’, you know? Because I am more than that” (Delilah, age 30).

Migrant women were highly motivated and proactive in their efforts to resolve their homelessness. Many, for example, had established positive relationships with service staff members and were prepared to follow all available advice. A number had enrolled in free courses in their local libraries in an effort to access relevant education and training and improve their English language skills. However, they faced numerous structural barriers related to welfare, the labour market, and housing structures. These restrictions had a dramatic negative impact on their ability to access housing.

Conclusion

The findings presented here demonstrate that migrant women's homelessness is connected to a host of vulnerabilities and deprivations, all of them strongly associated with their gender and socio-economic position. Marginality within contexts of economic adversity was at the core of migrant women's accounts of becoming homeless.

Intimate partner violence emerged as a prominent 'trigger' to homelessness and was an experience that had far reaching economic, social, and personal consequences for women. Those who reported intimate partner violence or abuse had experienced multiple oppressions that impacted on their responses to abusive home situations; basic survival issues, such as economic stability, food, and housing were primary considerations for these women and, for a majority, the economic consequences of leaving an abusive home were severe. Their immigration status affected their responses to intimate partner violence or abuse and those women who faced the prospect of losing their immigration status on leaving these relationships were particularly vulnerable. Marriage or relationship breakdown therefore had a particularly negative impact on the economic positions of a number of women since it excluded them from both the labour and housing markets. Women in this position had no right to welfare assistance, very often in the context of having responsibility for the full-time care of their children. Many also risked being socially isolated by their communities, family members, and friends in the event of disclosing abuse by their intimate partner. The stigma and shame conferred by 'homeless' and 'abused' identities created a double jeopardy for many of the women interviewed, making them reluctant to disclose their situations to outsiders, on the one hand, and to access appropriate services and supports, on the other.

Migrant women's lack of knowledge about available support services prolonged their exit from domestic violence situations and made the experience of becoming homeless more daunting, intimidating, and frightening. This was particularly evident in the case of women who relied on strangers for advice, highlighting their fear of approaching services directly. These findings suggest that migrant women occupied a paradoxical space in which they acknowledged their need for help and advice but were simultaneously uncertain about their eligibility for support services.

Job loss emerged as a common 'trigger' of homelessness, with five of the seventeen migrant women reporting that a sudden loss of income had propelled them into a homeless situation. For many, the economic problems associated with unemployment were exacerbated by challenges that were quite specific to their status as migrants. Most notable were the economic consequences of not meeting the Habitual Residence Condition, which left a number with no entitlement to welfare support and therefore no means of sustaining their housing situations. These women often had weak social support networks and many did not have immediate access to the support of family members. Some were reluctant to divulge their difficult economic situations to family members in their home countries, not wanting to appear destitute or to burden parents or siblings with knowledge of their situations.

Migrant women experienced systemic or structural barriers to housing, due in large part to their inability to independently secure housing. Income poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to the housing market were major obstacles to housing stability. Those who had experienced intimate partner violence emphasised the negative effects of this abuse on them personally and on their children. This, combined with the challenges associated with balancing childcare responsibilities while searching for a job, acted as major barriers to securing housing. The experiences of those women in situations of domestic violence were therefore exacerbated by their specific position as migrants, notably their uncertain legal statuses, lack of English language proficiency, and their constrained access to the labour market. It is perhaps important to note that migrant women were highly motivated to resolve their homelessness and expressed considerable self-determination in this regard. However, they risked becoming 'trapped' in homeless or domestic violence services because of their restricted access to affordable housing.

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